THE STORY OF GANESHA

EXCERPT FROM „INDIA AND ITS GODS“

COPYRIGHT © 2025 - EDUARD TROPEA

Modern Purāṇic / Popular-Hindu Gaṇeśa

Early Sūtra/Smṛti Vināyakas

This is the story of Gaṇeśa, also known as Vināyaka. Our story begins with the first mentions of these entities, dating back to around 600-300 BC. The Vināyakas were demonic spirits who possessed and plagued humans. They created obstacles, caused nightmares, and brought misfortune of every kind and scale. They were simply malevolent, and propitiation was essential to deal with them. Appeasement rituals were necessary to ward off their harmful influences.

Around the 4th century he was integrated into the Hindu Pantheon. He was appointed by Brahmā and Śiva to be the leader of the Gaṇas and received the title Gaṇapati. The Gaṇas are mischievous and mighty celestial beings who serve as the loyal attendants and formidable army of the god Śiva.

Vināyaka in the Yājñavalkyasmṛti (≈ 6th-century Dharmashāstra)

Though he was recognized as a deva—a divine figure—he still continued to cause obstacles and suffering if not properly worshipped. Rites for appeasement and propitiation were still needed, sometimes involving impure offerings like fish, meat, and wine. He remained a dangerous spirit, but his image transformed over the centuries into a super-positive divine creature.

Later around 650 CE Gaṇeśa appeared in Chinese Buddhism as a negative, demonic figure. "Vināyaka, the Hinderer", an obstructive deity, an obstacle-creator, who disturbs Buddhist practitioners, causes fear, sends bad dreams, and generally hinders spiritual progress. He had to be controlled, expelled, or even destroyed through mantras and rituals. He was feared as the elephant-headed spirit that hinders all vows.

The „Great Alley“ Hell

In that context, many people at the time believed an elephant head signified punishment for dire sins—a consequence of extremely bad, evil deeds, in addition to a horrific hellish experience with tortures and fires.

„Between the Re-birth Hell and the Black-Rope Hell there is a hell called **Great Alley**, resembling a vast market street. Inside it, sinners sometimes lie face-up, sometimes face-down, or are cast into iron mortars and pounded with iron pestles. Others are sliced joint by joint from their feet up to their necks. Some have their skins flayed and spread upon the ground, then their flesh is carved off and heaped upon the skins. Still others have their hands chopped off with a sword; yet each time they raise their arms the hands grow back, so the severed hands pile up like mountains. Feet, ears, noses and heads are likewise struck off and regrow, the heap of heads and noses rising mountain-high. Until the evil karma is exhausted they long for death but cannot die ... Within this hell the beings appear in many varieties: **some have the heads of elephants with human bodies; others have horse heads and human bodies; yet others ox heads with human bodies**, and so on in countless forms.“

Chinese-Buddhist Vināyaka (Tang guardian type)

In his later Hindu Tāntric form, late 7th to 8th century, his evil, demonic traits appeared in a more drastic form, including perverted preferences concerning sexuality and sanitation. Rites and offerings took place in impure locations like cremation grounds and included orgies, disgusting, unhygienic feasts, defiled left-overs, intentionally not rinsing the mouth for keeping the food scraps. Impure offerings like meat, fish and alcohol were used. Rituals were also aimed to evil effects like causing violence and harm, destroy enemies, gain power, using harmful or inauspicious substances like ape fat, corpse hair, or human bones. Some rituals were designed to delude, enslave, paralyze, or kill. He was typically depicted with a nude Śakti in an erotic pose, his trunk touching her genitals, showing his phallus, sometimes even erected. The main goals of this worship were the attainment of magical powers and worldly benefits.

Hindu Tantric Ucchiṣṭa Vināyaka (red, four-armed raktamūrti)

In his later form in Japanese Buddhism in the first half of the 9th century, he was called Kangi-ten, the God of Bliss, or Shōten, the sacred or noble God. Nonetheless, he retained a basically evil character, well known for being volatile, demanding, and jealous. He was still bound by passions and was well known for his high irritability. If he felt neglected or offended, he was known to react quickly with anger and send obstacles or punishments. His nature was very demanding and elaborate appeasement rituals were needed to avoid pain. If one followed the cult properly with appropriate, albeit sometimes impure, offerings, wishes would be granted in exchange. This even included immoral ones, like harming enemies. It was made clear that dealing with this deity would be as efficient as dangerous.

Japanese Shingon **Single-bodied Kangiten** (Tanshin form)

In the later Tibetan Vajrayāna form he still had this evil, negative character. He was supposed to cause suffering and had to be propitiated or liberated to avoid destruction. He was still the one to approach for harming enemies and gaining worldly wealth, pleasure, or success. His appearance got wrathful and terrifying, often red-colored with multiple arms, three eyes, tusks and a variety of weapons.

Tibetan Vajrayāna Vināyaka (Mahā-Rakta, Sakya lineage)

Mahākāla is considered to be a wrathful form of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of universal compassion. He tramples the demonic, evil Vināyaka, to end the suffering from his victim. Mahākāla is a protector of the Dalai Lama who praises Mahākāla for trampling Vināyaka.

Mahākāla tramplest Vinayaka, to end the suffering from his victim.

The form we see worldwide today was primarily shaped by the later Purāṇas from 600-1300 CE. With many new stories, he ascended to the highest rank of a top deity like Śiva, even considered the supreme Lord himself. Everyone loves him, as he represents the joy of living: absolutely peaceful, positive, trustworthy, even a perfect companion for all children. This overwhelmingly positive image was finally established for the vast majority of Hindus in the 10th century.

To be fair, there are also teachings that identify him as Avalokiteśvara, Mahākāla or other forms, comparable to some of the angry, scary and mighty protecting, defending, demon taming or killing aspects of the high-ranking gods. Doubtless, he can and does grant wishes if he's worshipped properly. This includes solving issues related to demonic spirits. But all that doesn't make him a fundamentally benevolent power.

Fascinating is his transformation from black to bright white. How is this even possible? What truly happened? Did he undergo such a radical transformation? While popular stories about his creation give the impression of a newborn being, that seemingly isn't the truth. The facts show he existed long before he became so famous in Hinduism. Or could all this simply be related to other, similar elephant-headed entities? Hard to imagine, isn't it?

Honestly, would you let your kids play around with such a spirit? Would you trust a spirit with such a past? Why would any good-hearted person praise such an entity? I am not surprised about these findings on Gaṇeśa. To me they fit in the picture and make perfect sense. Hindu-scriptures are appreciated because of the beauty of the stories and the wisdom and inspiration they provide. But what about the truth? Does that matter?

References: Appendix

See also next chapter „The Ambivalent God“.